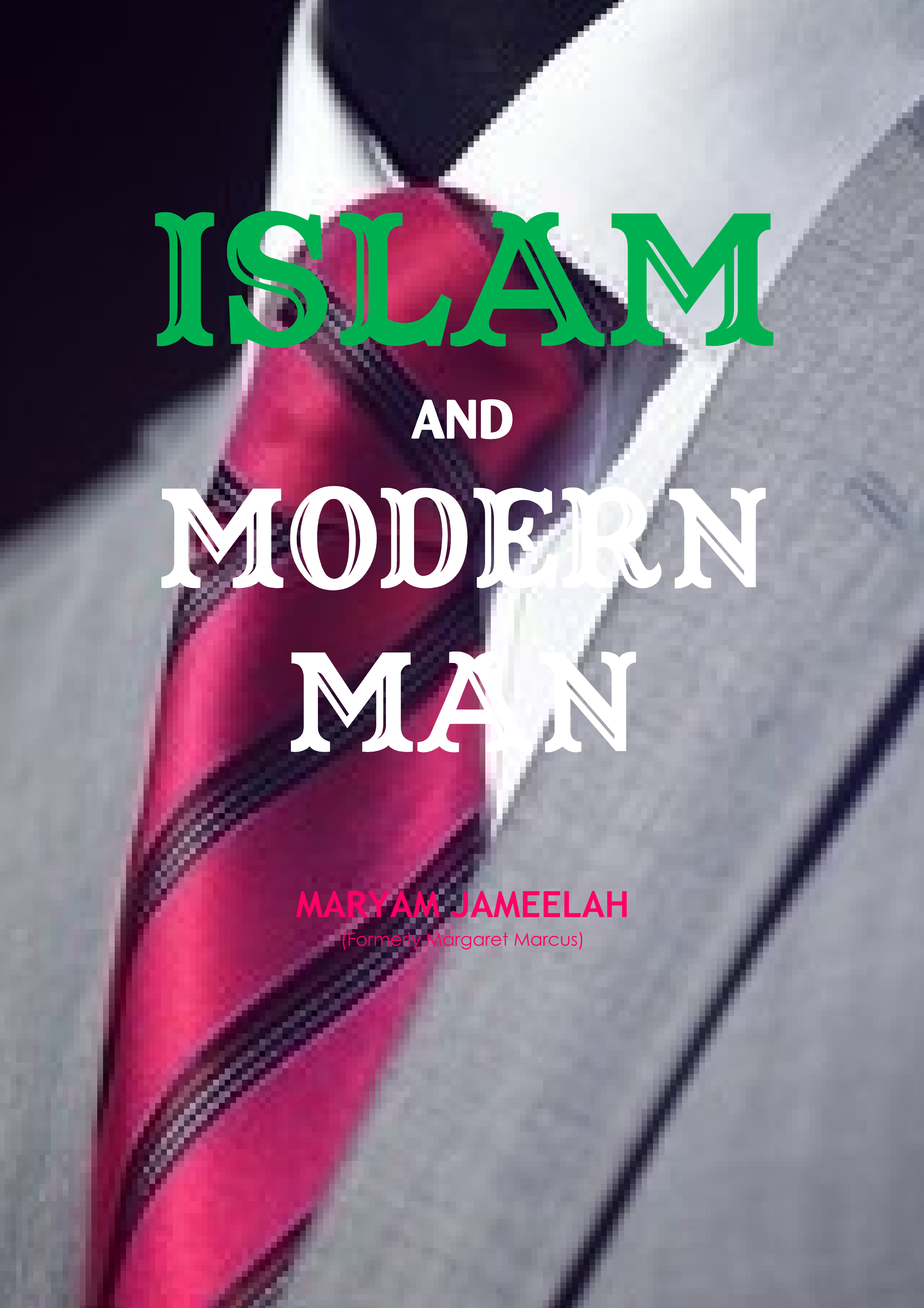
ISLAM AND MODERN MAN



MARYAM JAMEELAH
(Formerly Margaret Marcus)

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THE PROSPECTS OF AN ISLAMIC RENAISSANCE

The opponents of those who are striving to build a genuine Islamic society argue with the most arrogant cynicism that Islamic civilization has vanished forever, that its era of creativity is past history and that it has nothing more to contribute to the world. They take supreme delight in relating how one Muslim country after another has succumbed to Western civilization. The various stages of acculturation are described in detail in order to prove that the disintegration of Islamic life and the complete triumph of Westernization are inevitable. It is furthermore asserted that nothing can stop this process. The assumption is that modern civilization is invincible. No propaganda technique in the hands of our enemies has proved so successful in demoralizing the rising generation of Muslim youth than the adoption of these clichés. Despite voluminous propaganda to the contrary, Western civilization is far from invincible. Racial hatred, class conflicts, the epidemic of lawlessness, the perversion of scientific achievements for destructive purpose, the debility of the family, drug and alcohol addiction, universal indulgence in illicit sex and the waste of natural and human resources for luxurious living are some of its most vulnerable weaknesses. What has doomed all other civilization of the present? Our most precious asset over our adversaries is that genuine Islamic life is not contaminated with any of these corruptions. Western civilization only appears invincible because there is no rival. Once effective opposition appears on the scene, the corruption of modern culture will be exposed for all to see.

Most devastating to our cause are those of our writers who escape from a practicable and realistic solution of present day problems by over glorifying the past, entirely overlooking the fact that the most extravagant praise of the achievements of Muslims a thousand years ago, provides no guarantee that the Islamic community will flourish in the future. These well meaning authors write reams in praise of our Holy Prophet and his companions, never tiring of rejoicing in the superiority of the “noble spiritual principles of Islam” coupled with a most vituperative condemnation of the “materialistic West” as if their effusive verbalism would automatically result in a beautiful Islamic utopia without any further effort needed on their part!

As one Muslim writes about this problem:

The Muslims of the world are passing through the most critical period in their history. The western civilization called modernism has dominated over all other civilizations with the forceful hammerings of scientific advancement. Christianity fought against it desperately but it could not stand any longer for it had many vulnerable chinks in its armour. Other religions met the same fate as Christianity. There may still different customs prevailing in different countries but none can deny that they are highly influenced and imbued with modernism, so much so that they are totally changed and have lost their originality. Although the Muslims of all countries are trying hard to ward off the mighty blow dealt by modernism, they are losing ground against it. Even most of the

Muslims themselves have welcomed it and are now gradually being absorbed into this universal civilization.

Superficially at least, the chances for the success of those determined to implement Islamic life on a significant scale would appear to be extremely remote. The recovery of political sovereignty from European rule has not at all weakened the influence of Western culture. On the contrary, under the slogan of “economic development”, the westernization of Asia and Africa continues to progress at an ever-accelerating speed.

The beginning of the 19th century witnessed the merging of Islamic society into the world-wide society of the present era. To become aware of these implications is in my view the greatest single problem of the Islamic society of our day. The influence of the West has been so great that even when the Islamic peoples regained their political independence they have found that a return to the traditional Islamic way of life was not possible.

If the above quotation is so typical of the mentality of our modern-educated elite, must we Muslims yield to complete pessimism and bow to defeat? If every other civilization has been vanquished by modernism, must we meekly resign ourselves to the same fate? Is there no hope for us?

However bleak the prospect for an Islamic renaissance may appear at present, I still maintain that there yet remains considerable hope for us provided we take the appropriate action in time. This ray of optimism is based on the following assumptions;

1. The fundamental sources of Islam --- the Quran and the Sunnah --- are uncorrupted and intact. No other religion can claim this advantage.
2. As Islamic teachings are comprehensive, all-embracing in scope and entirely self-sufficient, Islam does not tolerate eclecticism or compromise with any culture in conflict with its principles. Islam alone provides adequate guidance for life in its totality. Not only does Islam tell us what to do but also specifically how to do it. The exant teachings of all other religions are limited, restricted and fragmentary.
3. The determination to preserve and propagate Islam in its original purity has been practically implemented in every period of Islamic history simultaneously in every Muslim country by a long series of Mujaddids. Although with the support and encouragement of Western scholars and politicians, the modernists attempt to force their distorted interpretation of Islam upon the entire community, happily they are encountering stiff resistance on every side from those who are not deceived by this hypocrisy and are determined to preserve an unadulterated Islam intact.
4. From Morocco to Indonesia the overwhelming majority wants Islam and once inspiring leadership is prouded, they will be ready to follow most enthusiastically.

This being the case, why has not Islamic leadership emerged in any Muslim country? We must realize that this is not on account of any intrinsic merit of Western culture, much less inherent inadequacy of Islam. The answer can be found by an insight into the nature of European imperialism. In 1908, Lord Cromer wrote very revealingly in the last chapter of his book, Modern Egypt, that England was prepared to grant eventual political freedom to all of her colonial possessions as soon as a generation of intellectuals and politicians, imbued through English education with the ideals of English culture, were ready to take over, but under no circumstances would the British Government tolerate for a single moment an

independent Islamic state. What was true in the case of Egypt is equally applicable to Pakistan and what was British policy was also French, Italian and Dutch policy and remains American and Russian policy to this day. Consequently, our political sovereignty is more nominal than real and the Western powers through economic means are determined to keep it that way.

At this stage it is essential to examine the social structure of the Muslim countries in relation to the issues at stake.

On the top rung of our social and economic ladder we have our modern-educated elite who, although Arab, Indian Malay or African by blood, are carbon duplicates in their mentality of their ex-overlords, zealously determined to make their respective countries as closely as possible resemble the societies in Western lands. Although constituting only a small fraction of the total population, they hold all the power and unless their activities are stopped in time, the perverted moral and cultural values, hitherto limited to the aristocratic elite, will spread and contaminate all classes of the people.

At the bottom of the ladder is the second group which is more than three quarters of the population in all Muslims countries---that is, the simple common folk. This second group includes all of these who by good fortune have remained removed from the impact of modern culture and not received a modern education. Although these Muslims are mostly poor and illiterate people in humble occupations, the ulema and Imams of mosques who have received an exclusively madrassah type education (such as, al-Azhar or Deoband) also belong to this category. Although most of them are good Muslims at heart and some even in practice, because of their naïve ignorance, they are easily deceived and although they are numerous, because they are so weak disorganized, they are powerless. To make matters even worse, many, if not most, in this group observe Islam much more as habit and custom than personal conviction. Because there is no dynamism nor vitality left in the traditional culture they represent, the modern-educated youth cannot help but associate everything "Islamic" with what is old, primitive, backward, poor and dying while every thing "Western" appears to them as bright and beautiful. And to the foreign tourist, this "traditional" culture is but the decaying remnants of the "exotic" Orient. Because no young person can bear to be stigmatized as backward or a reactionary fanatic and yearns to be praised as enlightened, modern and progressive, as soon as these youth can qualify at the government or Christian missionary higher institutions of learning as businessmen, technicians, doctors, teachers or social workers, to gain prestige and respect they are determined to put an end to all "traditionalism" and spread the "blessings" or modernism to the most remote corners of the land. With the full backing of the Government and the Western powers with their technical assistance programmes and foreign business investments, they are sure to succeed. The most the simple folk can do is offer passive resistance. And even if they themselves do not succumb, their children after imbibing modern education inevitably must.

If the question rested with these two groups alone our cause would indeed be hopeless but thanks to God there is slowly emerging a third group who, although smallest of all numerically, will decisively determine the future of the Muslim community. These are the men and women who, although having been thoroughly exposed to Western culture and received a modern education even to the extent of studying or working abroad in Europe or America, have by the grace and mercy of God maintained their faith and love for Islam,

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demonstrating in their daily lives, their zeal and readiness for self-sacrifice to implement their faith. Because this group possesses the necessary intellectual weapons to resist effectively modernist penetration into Islamic life, they alone are qualified for the leadership of the Muslim world.

The prevailing view of contemporary Muslim writers and scholars is that the Christian Church in Europe lost its power and influence between of its irrational dogmas of the Trinity, the Incarnation, Original Sin or the reactionary institution of the priesthood. Since Islam is a simple and straightforward doctrine having no inherent conflict with scientific progress and no priestly hierarchy set apart from the bulk of believers, it is immune to the catastrophe which befell Christendom. This line of reasoning, comforting as it may be, is dangerous wishful thinking. How ever contrary to Islam Christian dogma and institutions have always been, they themselves were not the cause of Christendom's downfall. When the Catholic Church was confronted with the secular humanism of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and tidal wave of atheist materialism which followed the French Revolution, all the Church did was resort to purely negative measures. Thus the Church welded all the power it could command to conduct a systematic persecution of non-conformists, organized heresy hunts, infamous inquisitions, invoked excommunication and the burning of heretical books. Had the Catholic Church employed its best scholars to refute intellectually with logical and persuasive arguments the fallacy of the materialistic philosophers instead of merely hurling anathemas of heresy and placing their writings on the index of forbidden books, quite probably the Church would have succeeded in retaining its influence undiminished. Unfortunately, instead of appealing to the minds and hearts of its members and thus inspire love for Christianity in the minds of the Christians, these repressive actions incited nothing but hatred and rebellion. Even if, from the point of view of the Church, its heretics deserved what they received, repressive measures alone are not only cruel and inhuman but utterly ineffective, completely defeating their own purpose. Those who want to implement Islam by force and blood shed should take a lesson from the history of Christendom.

Although we Muslims, thank God, have never been guilty to such an intense degree of persecuting those who do not agree with us, still we must be honest with ourselves and confess that some of us have committed in a milder way, the same mistake. Merely cursing Western civilization as "materialistic", "ungodly" and "satanic" (as true as this is) cannot in the slightest counter its growing allurement for our modern educated youth. Hurling vituperatives of heresy at the modernists is not going to stop them. The question at stake is not whether they deserve to be labeled as kafir. Quite probably they do but is this sufficient to accomplish anything constructive for our cause? The answer is an emphatic no ! The final judgment is God's---not ours---and we as believers can rest confident that if we exert ourselves to the utmost for Islam, God will punish as He sees fit.

The crisis the Muslims are facing today is nothing new. Centuries ago we were faced with the same problem with the growing popularity of secular Greek humanism propagared by such Mu'tazilite philosophers as al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd all of whom exactly like the modernists today, tried to concoct a new brand of Islam. But by the grace and mercy of God, al-Ghazzali in his Incoherence of the Philosophers ripped their fallacies and intellectual dishonesty that the Mu'tazilite movement was halted in its tracks. Ibn Taimiya dealt the rationalists the fatal blow. Henceforth Greek humanism lost all its

influence and never again did the Mutazilite philosophy command any respect in the Muslim world.

What the Muslim world today needs above all is a modern al-Ghazzali and a modern Ibn Taimiya. The task of their successors would not be nearly so complicated it as may seem at first because the secular humanism of ancient Greece does not at all essentially differ from contemporary materialist philosophy. The latter is but a further development of the former.

One of the most important tasks of our modern Ibn Taimiya is to refute the bogey of progress. Our obsession with "change" and "progress" and "moving with the times to meet the challenge of the age" is nothing but a modernist dogma derived from the Darwinian theory of evolution and incorporated into social philosophy as materialist concept of history by Karl Marx. As Muslims we should be concerned only with submission to the will of God through unquestioning obedience to Quran and Sunnah in its plain, literal meaning. Once we attain cultural independence, we do not have anything to fear from a natural and spontaneous social evolution and development within the context of our indigenous Islamic values and ideals. So long as we remain slaves to modernism, however, change means nothing except progressive abandonment of Islamic values in exchange for the Western way of life and this is why under the present circumstances, every change is from the Islamic point of view to our detriment.

There is nothing "new" or "progressive" about modernism. Despite science, technology and economic development, ideologically Western civilization has not changed at all since the Age of Pericles nearly 2,500 years ago.

Ibu Taimiya's modern successor must also expose the modernist dogma concerning the so-called necessity for complete freedom of inquiry on the part of students and teachers in higher institution of learning as just another bogey. This demand for complete freedom of "rational" and "scientific" inquiry is but another dogma of modernism derived from the philosophy of Socrates as recorded by his pupil, Plato and continuing to this day under the guise of "liberalism". Divested of its sophistry, this so-called intellectual freedom is intended for the sole purpose of casting doubt and ridicule on the foundations of faith and mock God, His revelation and the Here after which has found its legal expression in the Soviet Constitution of 1936 guaranteeing to all Russian citizens complete freedom of anti-religious propaganda. Freedom in its true sense must be freedom in every direction yet under the patronage of Western civilization, this so-called "reason" must always be pitted against revelation-never in its favour. Consequently, this so called "rational" and "scientific" inquiry is permitted to proceed in one direction only---the way of materialism. These people never tire of condemning traditional Islamic education for its lack of critical, creative or independent thinking but we are at a complete loss to find any more originality or independence in respect to theirs!

Another favourite technique of the modernists is to pit the "spirit" against the "letter" of Islam as if the two were irreconcilable! The letter of the Shariah, murders its spirit, so say the modernists. Consequently, the late Sayyid Ameer Ali in his well-known book The Spirit of Islam, suggests that the literal injunctions of Purdah are most "un-Islamic", but the Western concept of free mingling and absolute equality of the sexes is the true "spirit" and Islam ; the letter of the Shariah permits polygamy, but only monogamy, and marriage a liberal

Christians understand it, is in true conformity with the "spirit" of the Quran! The plain injuncitions of the Quran repeatedly urge Jihad against aggressive unbelievers as the most sacred duty of the Muslims, but Ameer Ali says that the "spirit" of Islam regards all warfare in the name of religion as a horrible sin, preferring peace at any price. The list could be added to indefinitely. The fallacy that the "letter killeth but the spirit giveth life" is a purely Christian idea taken from the Epistles of Saint Paul in the New Testament. Whatever Christian teachings may say, we as Muslims must summon the moral honesty to admit that this concept is totally foreign to Islamic values. Just as no creature can exist without its external shape, so in human society, the organization of institutions is essential because we cannot live as disembodied spirits. If the body of a human being were transformed into that of another creature, it could be human no longer. Similarly, the letter of Islam lives in its spirit and its letter, the two indivisible and inseparable.

Since the rise of modern technology, there has been endless and futile debate within the precincts of every religion as to its compatibility or incompatibility with modern scientific progress. If truth is one, then true faith could never conflict with true knowledge, that is, in its strict and impartial sense. The question arose only because modern science is not morally neutral but has evolved under the direct influence and patronage of materialist philosophy as its most important product and its most powerful weapon. One of the most essential tasks of modern Muslim scholarship is to distinguish genuine, useful and constructive knowledge from pseudo-scientific, materialist theory and speculation.

In my opinion the ideal Mujaddid or Mahdi will be a most modern leader of his age possessing unusually deep insight into all the current branches of knowledge and all the major problems of life. As regards statesmanship, political sagacity, and strategic skill in war, he will take the whole world by surprise and prove himself to be the most modern of the moderns. (p. 41). My view that the ideal Mujaddid will be a most modern leader does not mean that he will shave his beard, dress up in European clothes or live in the Western manner. I only mean to suggest that he will be fully conversant with the arts and sciences of his age, with its conditions and requirements and will use all scientific means and devices invented by it to the best advantage and all this is natural for unless a party captures all the available means of power and makes use of all existing arts and sciences, devices and techniques to propagate its influence, it cannot obtain its objectives and dominance in general.(p.147).

This means that our only alternative is to come to grips with our enemy and fight and that we had better possess some effective weapons to fight with. But here a word of warning. Coming to grips with modernism means fighting modernism---not compromising with it. And while waging our ideological and psychological warfare, we must never forget that once on the grounds of expediency we compromise and begin to resemble our adversaries, we shall have become as bad as they and have no reason to continue the struggle.

The God fearing creed cannot survive under the Godless leadership. Therefore it is incumbent on the God fearing people to establish the God fearing leadership in the world. The Muslims do not want leadership for selfish motives. Their contention with the materialists is not on the point of depriving them merely from the leadership. The Muslims want to regain the leadership on point of principle. The materialists are leading the world

towards Godlessness and open rebellion against their Creator. It is extremely difficult in this environment of Godless culture and civilization that the God fearing theory, aims and principles of life may appeal to the minds and hearts of human beings because the entire trend of modern life is diagonally opposed to it. As opposed to this theory and practice, the Muslims are a group of God fearing people who place their belief in the obedience to Allah. This faith enjoins on the Muslims not only to keep themselves away from the materialist creed of the West but also to show to the world their own God fearing path. This duty cannot be performed by them successfully unless the Muslims take back the leadership of the world from the materialists.



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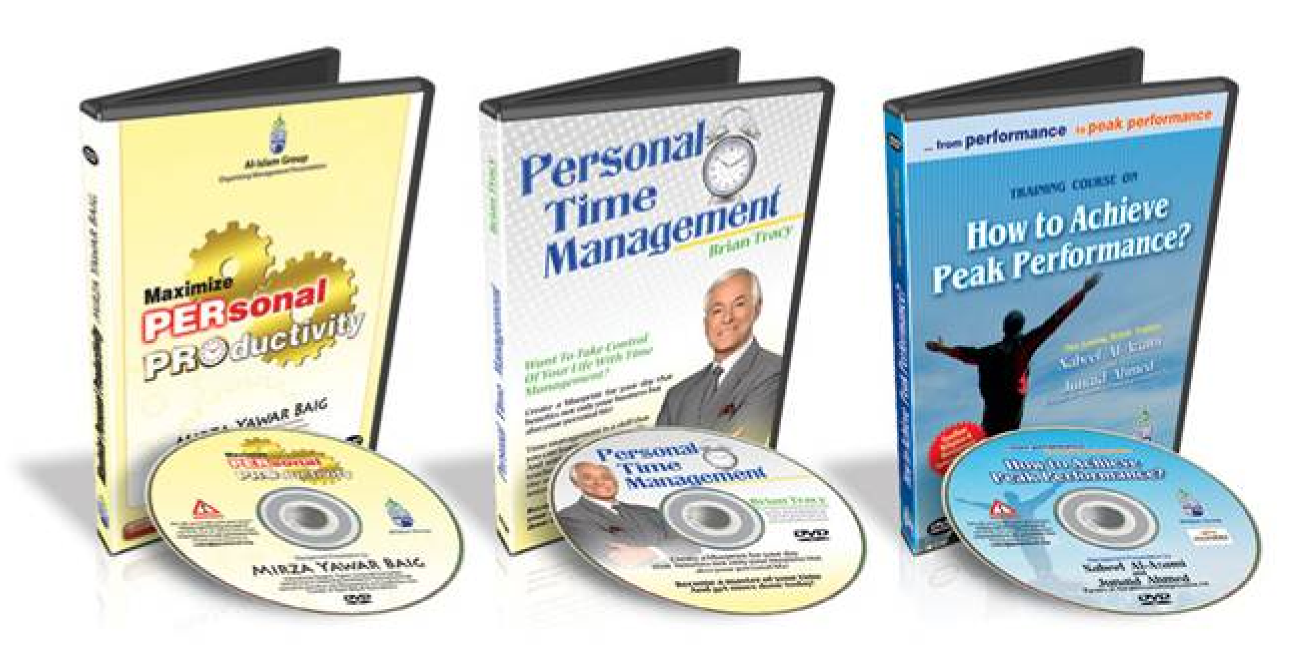
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